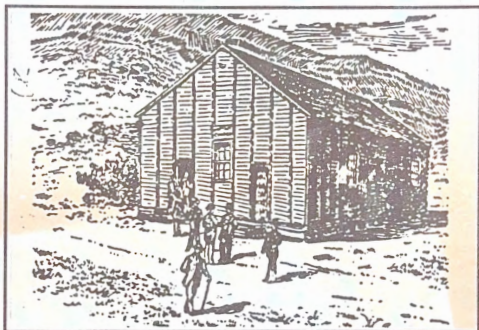


140

YEARS
1849-1989
FIRST BAPTIST
SAN FRANCISCO



First Building, 1849

On July 6, 1849, the first church formed in a home, with six charter members under the direction of Reverend O.C. Wheeler. Just a month later, the small church's first building, a simple wooden structure, was erected on Washington Street near Stockton. Following a procession which included the pastor, the mayor, city officials, the Pacific Naval Squadron, uniformed Marines, and the Prime Minister of Hawaii, the church's first baptism was performed in October of 1849, in the shallow waters off North Beach.

*First Baptist Church, San Francisco
Dr. James Higgs, Pastor*



Merv and Nora Betts
Rev. Mervyn Betts
Interim Pastor 1963-64
Minister at Large 1978-79



Jim and Joyce Higgs
Dr. James Higgs, Pastor
1st Baptist Church
San Francisco
January 1, 1980



1979 — 130th Anniversary and
Rededication of the church after the fire
Dr. Ronald Goulding, Speaker
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary
Rev. Mervyn Betts, Interim Pastor
Hector Gonzales, President
American Baptist Churches of the West



Jim and Joyce receiving their charge as
Jim assumed pastorate of 1st Baptist
Church San Francisco, January, 1980.
Gerald Hemingway, American Baptist
Churches of the West, Area Minister
at podium

Robert Rassmussen, Director of ABCW
and Doug Sidon, Area Director to left
Rev. Grady Higgs to right of podium

Born-again Church in the City

by Kevin Starr

San Francisco Examiner, Nov. 17, 1979

San Francisco has many noble religious buildings. One of my favorites is the First Baptist Church at Market and Octavia streets, a grand neoclassical structure completed in 1910. First Baptist dominates its corner, bringing to its neighborhood a substance and serenity, together with a suggestion of pre-Earthquake San Francisco.

Unfortunately, First Baptist was ravaged by fire in February. The interior of the building was severely damaged. The fire stopped just short of the grand sanctuary. Under the dynamic leadership of the Rev. Mervyn M. Betts, minister-at-large, and church member Rand Walker, chairman of the Operation Face Lift program, some \$150,000 has been raised, and the first phase of renovation has been completed.

The congregation celebrated this recovery recently with a week-long Festival of Faith. The Rev. C. Ronald Goulding, associate secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, was on hand for the occasion. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the World Baptist Alliance oversees the affairs of some 33 million Baptist in the United States.

Baptist Christianity is the most rapidly increasing denomination in the United States. Baptists emphasize salvation by faith, manifested in the sacrament of baptism. Baptists are traditional in their theology, which is Scripture-oriented. Essential to the Baptist experience is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Avoiding elaborate ritual, the Baptist sensibility seeks an intense and very personal relationship to the Word, Jesus Christ.

Founded in 1849 (it was the first Protestant Church building erected in California), First Baptist also opened the first Sunday school in San Francisco. Some 40 students were enrolled. The church's first baptismal service caused quite a stir in frontier San Francisco. The mayor, city celebrities, formally attired officers of the Navy and Marine Corps, together with the prime minister to Hawaii, then visiting San Francisco, marched down Stockton Street to the sandy water of North Beach, as an escort for those about to be baptized. The ceremony took place right in the waters of the Bay.

Over the years, First Baptist occupied a series of successively larger buildings. The 1906 earthquake destroyed one, located on Eddy Street between Jones and Leavenworth. Helped by a donation from Baptist John D. Rockefeller (\$75,000), the people of the church financed the construction of the present structure.

In the 1940's, First Baptist reached the pinnacle of its membership—some 4,600 members. Then the neighborhood lost its residential quality. People moved to the suburbs. Today some 325 congregants worship at First Baptist. It is a small congregation, but a vigorous and multi-ethnic one. It is also a congregation heartened by the reversal of the flight to the suburbs. As the city's oldest Protestant church, First Baptist has a symbolic value in the minds of its congregants.

They refuse to let the church go under. Of late, despite the fire, they see signs of an upswing. Like all inner city churches, First Baptist supports a series of service-oriented programs for senior citizens, working parents (a day care center) and the disaffiliated.

Upon the retirement of the Rev. John B. Streeter in 1977, Betts became minister-at-large (temporary pastor). A native New Zealander, Betts came to First Baptist (where he was ordained in 1959) after a career in Baptist education. In January, Dr. James Higgs, will come to the church as senior minister.

The fact that Goulding, the leader of 33 million American Baptists, came to San Francisco to give the key-note address at the rededication if of great significance. The Baptist denomination is quite strong in rural areas and in smaller towns. Goulding's presence signified, I believe, the determination on the part of the Baptist communion that their denomination become an active inner-city force as well.

Anyone arriving or departing San Francisco by the Fell Street ramp of the freeway has passed and repassed First Baptist. I personally have often wondered about the life within this grand building. I see now that it is in a certain sense, an embattled life. A shifting demography and a fire have done their best to bring First Baptist to its knees. But it hasn't happened.

The oldest Protestant church in San Francisco is in a very real sense one of the newest churches in the city. An important aspect of the Baptist experience is being born again in the Spirit. This is a church that has been Born again.

Reprinted by permission from the author for this 140th Anniversary, July 9, 1989.

First Baptist once had state's largest membership by Dan Borsuk

As printed in the San Francisco Progress, Sat., Dec. 7, 1974

A plaque located in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown commemorates the site of First Baptist Church. The plaque reads:

On this site was built the First Baptist Church of San Francisco, July, 1849. It was also the first Protestant church building erected in California. In it the first free public school in California was organized and held from Dec. 26, 1849 to June 22, 1851.

Spearheading the establishment of the church was the Rev. Osgood C. Wheeler, a young man who had served a congregation at Jersey City, New York.

The task of building the church, however, was by no means an easy chore. After arriving in San Francisco on Feb. 28, 1849, the pastor immediately began recruiting members.

Three months later, he and a good friend, C. L. Ross, canvassed the city for pupils for a Sunday school. The first class was conducted in late May with only one boy in attendance. But within four weeks 40 students were enrolled in the Sunday school.

Interestingly, when the building was erected it was a simple frame structure, with the sail of a ship used for its roof. By the time the edifice had a permanent roof, the Washington Street structure had cost the congregation \$6,000.

First Baptist's initial baptismal service caused a great deal of celebration in the city in October 1849. The mayor, City celebrities, representatives of the Navy and Marines and even the prime minister of Hawaii attended the celebration.

The festivities included a parade down Stockton Street to Union, to Powell and into the sandy waters of North Beach, where the service was conducted.

In 1851, news that First Baptist's building was destroyed by a devastating fire that charred most of the business district shocked Pastor Wheeler who was recuperating from an illness in Southern California.

The disaster produced a financial problem for the church, and compounding it was the untimely resignation of Pastor Wheeler.

For almost one year after the fire, the church was on unsteady footing, but on May 28th, 1852 the Rev. Benjamin Brierly assumed the pastorate and helped the church pull out of its financial dilemma.

He served the congregation until May, 1858 when the membership

numbered 131. He was also instrumental in organizing a building committee to erect a new brick chapel on Washington Street.

The succeeding pastor, Rev. Dr. David B. Cheney, brought to First Baptist a new era of growth and evangelism. His effective sermons attracted new members quickly. One month after his arrival 13 new congregants joined the church and the month following another 15 became members. Under his leadership, the First Baptist Church became the largest in the state, but in 1867 he was forced to resign because of asthma.

The Rev. Jesse Thomas next accepted the pastorate. During his two-year tenure, the large congregation continued to flourish, but by 1870 he also had to submit his resignation because of health.

A Sunday school for Chinese was established in 1870, and the first convert of Chinese ancestry, Dong Gong, was baptized the same year.

For the next five years, many pastors led the First Baptist congregation. Fortunately, the church was able to grow even in 1872 when it was in the midst of a tight financial bind. But by the time the Rev. E. B. Hulbert assumed the pastorate in 1874 the congregation had grown to 308 members and was economically stable.

The church's growth stimulated the need for a larger building, so on June 5, 1875, the trustees authorized the sale of the Washington

Street property and bought a parcel of property on Eddy Street, between Jones and Leavenworth.

The first public services in the Eddy Street basement were held on Jan. 23, 1876, and the building was completed on July 29, 1877.

The Eddy Street edifice served the congregation until the 1906 earthquake rattled the city. The building was totally destroyed from the fire that was an aftermath of the quake.

Dr. George E. Burlingame, who served as pastor, quickly made arrangements with friends in Chicago to send to San Francisco a tent so that services could be resumed. The congregation also worshipped in the old Park Chapel on Stanyan Street and the Swedenborgian Church on O'Farrell Street.

But First Baptist won the sympathy of many fellow Baptists in Oakland. The American Baptist Home Mission Society, meeting in Oakland, decided to raise funds for the revival of the San Francisco church.

The California Baptist Relief Committee was formed, and it collected a substantial amount of funds. Even the late John D. Rockefeller contributed \$75,000.

By August, 1908, the present site on Octavia and Market Streets was bought and a year later plans were drawn and construction began on the new building of "classic design." The building was completed on September 14, 1910.

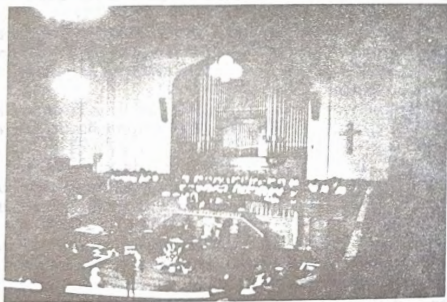
Ever since the first services in the present building, First Baptist's pastors have resolved other financial and congregational problems.

The church has experienced the fluctuation of its membership rolls. In the 1940's the church reached the pinnacle of its number of members, 4,600, but today only 325 congregants worship at First Baptist Church.

The Rev. John B. Streater, the church's pastor, cited the changes in the neighborhood as the primary reason for the decline in church membership.

Still, First Baptist will survive he said. Pastor Streater said the key to First Baptist's success has been the congregations drive and motivation to help fellow congregants or citizens.

First Baptist's many on-going programs, such as day care center, day school, senior citizens and many others, signify the church's interest in promoting social programs.



Praise God for His provision and for men of vision that made possible the beautiful sanctuary we now enjoy!



Reception following Installation Service for Pastor Higgs



With all the ceremony over—pastor gets down to work!



Fall retreat at Redwood Alliance—many fond memories



Lydia Phelps - a very special member of our fellowship



Luba, Pastor, Mary and Earl enjoy food and fellowship



They didn't play at Candlestick but they were a great team!

1979 A Decade of Change 1989

by Virginia Steffel

On February 6, 1979, a fire set by an arsonist brought 118 firemen to First Baptist Church. The fire was stopped just short of the grand Sanctuary. Firemen were able to preserve the old church's graceful glass dome and beautiful stained glass windows but the 3-alarm fire damaged school rooms and storage areas in the church basement and the main floor was badly charred. A metal-clad door kept the fire from burning the second story but there was \$125,000 in damage.

The church responded to this calamity with courage and determination. It was already a difficult time, in that at the end of 1977 Pastor John B. Streater had resigned. Rev. Merv Betts was called to serve as Minister-at-Large during the interim while a new pastor was being sought. Rev. Betts, a native of New Zealand, had originally been ordained in 1959 at San Francisco First Baptist Church and served as Interim Pastor during 1963 and 1964. In May of 1978 he left a position in a college to again assume responsibilities as Minister-at-Large.

The congregation experiences healing as they pray and work together

A very ambitious Operation Face Life Campaign was undertaken with Rand Walker as Chairman and Ken Crizer and Doris Lewis serving as Vice-chairmen. It was a healing time for the congregation and the Sunday school began to grow back from a low of about 80 to about 150. Special vesper services and times of prayer were held and the congregation began to be more united through this period

Pulpit Committee seeks out a pastor burdened for San Francisco

During this time the pulpit committee was receiving suggestions and following up leads. Doris Lewis recalls that about every third suggestion they received was for James Higgs. So in the summer of 1979 when Pastor Higgs came to preach for a series of meetings at Westlake Community Church (pastored by Rev. Grady Higgs, his father), the committee decided to attend one of the meetings. Afterward they asked Jim Higgs about the possibility of his considering the pastorate at First Baptist Church. They assured him they were not ready at the time to call a new pastor, but would be interested at a future time.

Pastor Higgs mentioned that family considerations were an important part of any decision. He was pastoring a church in Medinah, Illinois. It was growing under his leadership. His two boys were enrolled at Wheaton High School. It just didn't seem like something he could consider at that time.

The next morning Doris Lewis was in the church office when Pastor Higgs called. He hadn't slept well that night. He wanted to come in and talk a bit. The church was still quite a mess from the fire...not very inviting. But he had a very definite burden for the city from 1973 through 1977 and saw it grow to a strong church. Further consideration. (He had pastored Calvary Baptist Church in San Francisco. Though he made no commitment he was not closed to further consideration. (He had pastored Calvary Baptist Church in the city from 1973 through 1977 and saw it grow to a strong church.) During that time he had come to know the burden for San Francisco.) 18 months later, January 1, 1980, he came to be pastor at First Baptist Church of San Francisco!



Joyce and Jim Higgs cut the cake at welcoming reception given by the church

During the interim period under Merv Betts a great deal of hard work had gone on. By the time Pastor Higgs came, the sanctuary was back in order. There were new hymnals and Bibles in the pew racks and the lower auditorium was repaired.

First Baptist - spawning ground for churches of many nationalities

At least seven churches have been helped along in some way as they began here in the Greater San Francisco area this past ten years. When Pastor Higgs first came to First Baptist Church a Korean Presbyterian Church was meeting in the facilities. Eventually they purchased the Peoples Temple (of Jim Jones notoriety) and moved to their own facilities. Later a Portuguese congregation met at First Baptist till they had their own facilities. Three Filipino Churches have been established by our members moving out into the suburbs. Pastor Fred DeLeon has started International Baptist Church and Pastor Joe Labrador the Doane Baptist Church in Daly City. Joseph Garfield completed his studies at Golden Gate Seminary and is pastoring a church in Oakland.

Dave Lewis, who has served as Chairman of the Board, Sunday School Superintendent and many other positions, also completed studies at Golden Gate Seminary and is now pastoring Balboa Baptist Church. Dave Hanna, who also attended First Baptist while attending Golden Gate Seminary is now pastoring Belmont Baptist Church. For a time an Ethiopian ministry also met at our church under the direction of Rev. Shad Riddick. Rev. Riddick is now pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Rev. Patrick Pang who served as Youth Minister under Merv Betts, has also served in positions of great responsibility. Until recently he served as area evangelist for the American Baptist Churches for Alaska, Hawaii and the Western States. Another couple very fondly remembered by First Baptist are Rick and Connie Pribbernow. Rick served as age-group minister during 1984 to 1986 and both he and Connie were very much endeared to our children and young people.

First Baptist experienced many special blessings in the past ten years

First Baptist has been the recipient of many special blessings over the past ten years. Fred Ingel, a former Church Board Member, left a gift that has helped with many special projects in the past few years. Julia Hedges gave the gift of her beautiful old Victorian Home on Franklin to the church in 1982. This building has been used for various board conferences, singles meetings and activities.

Other bequests have been made by Elsie Bohne, Bernice Kahlstrom, Maurine Davis, Helen Vogel, Cleo Stevenson and Tillie MacDonald. These have made possible such projects as installing a sound system in 1983, buying the church computer, the choir loft renovation and office renovation, new choir robes and additional staff personnel.

First Baptist reaches out to the city with evangelistic and social concern

In 1983 First Baptist Church hosted a city-wide campaign with Leighton Ford as Evangelist. The church also hosted two events to help raise money to assist people with AIDS. One was an evening with Ken Medema and the second a dinner and evening program with Rev. Anthony Compolo. The Christian AIDS Council meets at our church with the purpose of helping in the prevention of AIDS through education and also bringing help and comfort to people with AIDS.

Pastor Higgs has been recognized for his leadership by the evangelical community. He brought the Sunrise Service message in 1988 at Aquatic Park and in 1989 at Mt. Davidson. He also has been a speaker at two City-wide Right to Life Rallies at St. Mary's Cathedral. He has an active radio ministry. His program, "Sounds of Joy" has brought letters from around the world. Sunday morning worship services have often been broadcast over Family Radio, KEAR. Pastor Higgs has served in the past as President of the National Association of Evangelicals for the Bay area and at present serves on the Executive Council.

December 1984—First Baptist becomes dually aligned

In December 1984, the church took a big step after much prayer and study, and became dually aligned with the American Baptist Churches and the Southern Baptist Convention. This has made it possible for Golden Gate Seminary students to intern under Pastor Higgs leadership and has added much to the skills and talents in our overall program. It has enriched our fellowship and added many new members.

Ed and Tobi Clark, both graduates of Golden Gate Seminary, came in 1984 to take over the music ministry of First Baptist. Doug Butler had been volunteer choir director for many years. Ed has enlarged the choir and worked hard to make the worship service meaningful and complimentary to the message of the morning. Ed has also given special attention to care and maintenance of our magnificent pipe organ.

Many special programs have made First Baptist Church known for its excellence in music. These include the Easter Tableau of "The Lord's Supper," the special Christmas musicals and in 1988 the "Living Christmas Tree" which was produced using almost everyone in the church either in the production or behind the scenes. The program was attended by over 2000 people.

Many projects completed because of volunteers from far and near

The Trinity Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas sent 60 members to clean and paint rooms in the church and donate and install new lighting in the sanctuary and a sound system in our lower auditorium. Another blessing was brought by members of Baptist Churches coming from North Carolina to help us paint and furnish a coffeehouse recreation center for youth on Fillmore Street.

A project completed in November 1987 was the rewriting of the church Constitution and By-Laws. Many late hours were spent!

In 1988 an undeveloped area in the church was transformed by many hours of volunteer labor into a modern attractive nursery and child care facility named in honor of Mrs. Lydia Phelps who spent many years working with little ones in our church.

The church is experiencing stability and gradual growth

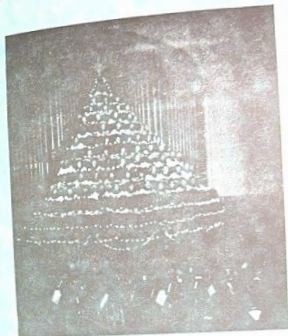
In the past ten years church attendance has gradually grown to close to 400. The financial base has become more solid with the budget growing by 150 per cent since 1980 (from less than \$100,000 to a little over \$250,000).

Outreach to our community has included a telephoning campaign followed by letters and advertisements of musical events and home visitation. During the summer of 1989 Larry and Linda Holcomb are serving full-time in the community, including visitation, open air work and the coffeehouse ministry on Fillmore. Larry is Youth Director of First Baptist Church.

The International Christian School began in 1971 and in 1977 came under the leadership of Rev. Obadiah Patnaik. During his years as principal the school has grown to over 300 students and has expanded from preschool to include a full elementary school through grade six.

At present there is a well-organized biweekly singles group and couples group and an active youth program as well as the regular meetings and ministry of the church. Mrs. Juanita Larkin has maintained a strong Senior Adult program which meets every Tuesday.

We thank God for His goodness and grace to the body of believers here at First Baptist and pray He may find us faithful stewards as we worship and fellowship. May we be His witnesses to this very beautiful and needy city—San Francisco—a city of people who have come to us from the ends of the earth!



Living Christmas Tree — 1988



Christmas 1987, Ed Clark directing

The materials included in this booklet are to give an overall look at our history and a more concentrated look at the past ten years. Plans are to make a commemorative book with many more pictures and additional information. It should be available toward the end of the year. Any additional information or pictures of important events during the last ten years may be given to the office or to the Steffels.